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# Book review of 'Life and Death on Mt. Everest: Sherpa and Himalayan Mountaineering' by Sherry B. Ortner

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tone. Though sometimes one misses in this volume a critical assessment of the different attitudes within the ethnic groups themselves in this volume — such as the fact that Rana rule also enabled the rise of local ethnic elites — on the whole, Krämer's arguments are very well established. In the higher echelons of the political system, the high castes, as usual, predominate. In order to achieve a trend toward equality in society it will not be sufficient merely to incorporate "ethnic candidates;" in the long run, instead, following the insights from Krämer's study, we can rest assured that the true demands of those moderate and faithful ethnic organizations should be respected.

Michael Mühlich

### **Life and Death on Mt. Everest: Sherpa and Himalayan Mountaineering.**

By Sherry B. Ortner. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1999.

I picked up Sherry Ortner's book because as a mountaineer and historian, I tend to pick up everything written on the subject. Her evocative title conjured up images of the 1996 tragedy on Everest where eight people lost their lives. A brief read through the preface suggested that this book, published in 1999, offers much more than a sensational description of events. Sherry Ortner offers the reader a deep examination of place and space where cultures, economies, and agendas merge in dependent, and perhaps precarious ways. I settled down for a good read, imagining that her commitment to deconstruct stereotypes of Sherpa guides and porters would allow me to briefly enter the Nepalese culture I enthusiastically embraced during my two visits in 1979 and 1999.

I was not disappointed. Ortner delivers a complex and comprehensive look at the mingling of cultures high up in the death zone. How does she do this? Ortner writes "In order to get any depth of insight into the dynamics of the relationship between Sherpas and sahibs, we must situate both groups very carefully in their own contexts, both within a given historical period and across time." In utilizing a historical framework that emphasizes changes over time, Ortner manages to avoid presenting the reader with a simplistic snapshot image of pre-modern Sherpa culture and the evolution of the mountaineering game. And, in placing equal emphasis on the historical and cultural contexts of those who climb and those who support the climbers, Ortner gives the reader the means to follow her through subsequent chapters that deconstruct stereotypes of sahibs and sherpas alike.

To understand the Sherpa culture Ortner looks at the meaning of mountaineering to the local culture and economy, and in so doing, provides unique insights into the meaning of Sherpa cheerfulness. Subsequent chapters examine the role of an evolving religion that influences Sherpa behavior-- especially views of compassion and fatalism, the meaning of death on the high peaks, and how mountaineering may shape the Sherpa definition of "masculine." Sahib-Sherpa relationships take on new definition with the rise of the 1970's counterculture and with the increasing participation of Sherpas and of women sahibs with a feminist agenda. Finally, Ortner leads the reader to consider "has success spoiled the Sherpas?" as she examines the difficult changes and dilemmas accompanying the rise of commercial mountaineering expeditions.

I found myself both frustrated and grateful as I read this book. The mountaineer in me wanted to see more of the climbing focus, yet the historian in me was pleased to be educated with regard to Sherpa culture and religion. At times I resented the necessary structuralism in Ortner's organization. However, Ortner's periodic use of first person voice, drawn from her own fieldwork and from a wide range of quotes from familiar mountaineering books, served to illustrate analytical points and recapture my interest.

I especially appreciated Ortner's use of photographs. I couldn't help feeling that the picture of a frost-bitten Maurice Herzog, carried by a Sherpa over a precarious pole bridge spanning a raging torrent, while guided in front and in back by other Sherpas, represented the essence of Ortner's book. In this book of sahibs, mountains and Sherpas, the focus is on the mountaineer and Sherpa agendas with the summit standing as a metaphor for the synapse between the two. In this dynamic, people-oriented analysis of the processual rela-

tionship between Sherpa and high-altitude mountaineers, Ortner lets the participants voices and images dispel stereotypical cultural traits.

In reading this book, I gained a broader understanding of the Sherpa and of the many ways in which Sherpa-mountaineering relationships affect and transform the nuances of their culture. I also found myself wanting more of Ortner's own voice, more of a record of the researchers' experience in this mountainous realm. Thus, I turned to Ed Douglas' 1997 book *Chomolungma Sings the Blues* (Constable Press, London). I found it to be a fine companion to Ortner's work, with Ortner's conclusions validated by Douglas' engaging record of his travel experiences as he sought to determine the ecological and cultural health of the Everest region.

To conclude, mountaineers and Himalayan researchers, armchair or otherwise, are going to see Sherpas differently from reading this book. I look forward to Ortner's next work with the hopes that it takes me full circle, to consider the ongoing evolving relationships between Sherpa, mountaineers, and anthropologists with this current work serving as a baseline.

Ted Edwards, Santa Cruz, California

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